

The Free Churches Today.

"SINCE the great Liberal landslide in 1906, one of the greatest changes in the English religious and social landscape has been the decline of Nonconformity." Such is the striking judgment of Professor D. W. Brogan, expressed in his book *The English People*. Many remember the great Liberal victory of 1906 and the Government which came into power as a result. In the Cabinet were men like Asquith, Simon, Runciman, Lloyd George and Hewart—all of them directly or indirectly connected with the Free Churches; while in the House of Commons there were no less than 157 members who were in active membership with some Free Church. That victory probably represented the high water mark of the political influence of British Nonconformity. The Nonconformist Conscience was then a power in the land with which the politicians had seriously to reckon.

In those days the Free Churches possessed a galaxy of great preachers whose names were household words. Their regular Sunday congregations formed the largest section of the worshipping community of this country. Their Sunday Schools were crowded with children and, more significant still, with young men and women. Nonconformity was undoubtedly the strongest religious force in the country at that time.

Today, the Free Churches are but a shadow of their former selves. Their congregations are sadly diminished. Their Sunday Schools also have shrunk alarmingly, particularly at the senior end. Only about nine per cent of the Armed Forces of the Crown are now registered as Nonconformists. No longer, therefore, do politicians feel that they need attach very much importance to Free Church resolutions. Of course, the Free Churches are not alone in experiencing a serious diminution in numbers and influence. The Church of England has also suffered severely during these last fifty years; while, contrary to popular opinion, even Roman Catholic authorities in England are concerned about their lessened hold on their people. Nevertheless, the Free Churches have suffered more heavily than either the Church of England or the Roman Catholic Church. What are the reasons for this exceptional decline on the part of the Free Churches?

There are several minor reasons—political and social. The sinking of the Liberal party into comparative political impotence is one, for at the beginning of this century most Free Churchmen were Liberals. The growing gulf between the Free Churches and

the working-classes is another. This, in particular, is a tragedy for the Free Churches. They have so largely lost hold of the working-classes at the very time when these are coming into power and when the influence of the middle-classes is waning. The workers, who owe so much to the Free Churches historically, no longer, unfortunately, look to them for the fulfilment of their social aspirations. It is a tragedy also for the Labour Party itself, which is being progressively cut off from those sources which in its early days provided most of its finest inspirations and greatest leaders. If this continues, nothing will save Labour from the grip of materialism.

There is, however, a much deeper, and indeed a fundamental reason for the unique decline of Nonconformity within the last half-century. It is spiritual. The great Evangelical Revival, which began in the eighteenth century under the Wesleys and Whitfield, seems to have spent itself by the end of the nineteenth century. Ever since the beginning of the twentieth century, a spiritual decline has set in with ever increasing severity, which in time has affected the whole world and caused materialism of various kinds—practical, scientific, dialectic—to flourish. This spiritual decline has affected the Free Churches more than others because there is an intimate connection between the Free Churches and revival.

The Free Churches came into being at successive stages in our history and in different forms, through re-discoveries of vital elements of New Testament Christianity. Now, New Testament Christianity is essentially revival Christianity. The New Testament, apart from the Gospels, is the record of the faith, experience and practice of Christians in the full tide of that spiritual revival which began on the Day of Pentecost. *The Acts of the Apostles* and the Epistles have all the characteristics of revival Christianity—the vivid realization by ordinary believers of an inward and personal relationship with God, giving them intense joy, deep peace, and great power. Now the Free Churches, in their early days were marked by this same vivid experience of an intimate personal relationship with God, enjoyed by so many of their ordinary members. Their distinctive witness and practice were derived from it. Naturally, therefore, churches which came into being as a result of great movements of revival are most likely to be the first to suffer when the tides of spiritual life begin to ebb rapidly. The other sections of the Christian Church, which have laid stress on the institutional and corporate rather than on the inward and personal elements in religion, have been less susceptible to the influence of either spiritual revival or spiritual declension.

We can see how this works out in practice. Consider the

question of worship, for example. Historically, the Free Churches have stood for simplicity of worship. This is revealed in the usual plainness of their buildings and their worship. In his essay on Milton, Lord Macaulay wrote concerning the Puritans: "They reject in contempt the ceremonious homage which other sects substitute for the pure worship of the soul. Instead of catching occasional glimpses of the Deity through an obscuring veil they aspire to gaze full on His intolerable brightness and to commune with Him face to face." We may think this a little harsh and even unjust to those who indulge in ceremonious worship and find it most helpful. Nevertheless, it is undoubtedly true that our Free Church forefathers, in their best days, experienced such a vivid sense of the presence of God when they met for worship, and enjoyed so intimate and immediate a fellowship with Him, that they were not conscious of the need of sensual aids to worship and were indifferent to the plainness of their places of worship. Their plain sanctuaries did indeed become to them the house of God and the very gate into heaven. They beheld the *shekina* glory. Now, however, the tides of revival have ebbed from our sanctuaries. The consciousness of the Divine Presence is not so intense as once it was. The sense of the Divine Glory has faded. Therefore, our people are complaining more and more about the inadequacy and poverty of our public worship and of the bareness and even ugliness of some of our sanctuaries. There is an unceasing call for external aids to worship and for liturgical enrichments. Anglican worship does not suffer to the same extent in these days of spiritual decline, especially where the church is ancient. Here the worshipper may be impressed by the architecture, the historic associations, the sense of the centuries, the long tradition of worship, the beauty of the interior, the incomparable liturgy, the charm of the music, etc. Even if there is no particular spiritual power in the service, there is not under such conditions, the same sense of bleakness and barrenness. There is at least a strong appeal to the aesthetic and devotional nature of man, and to certain special interests in addition.

These days of spiritual declension have had another peculiarly adverse effect upon the Free Churches. The distinctive witness of the Free Churches may be conveniently summarized as a witness to "the priesthood of all believers." We have no monopoly of this witness, it is true, but we have given it a much fuller expression in teaching and practice than it has received elsewhere. "The priesthood of all believers" stresses the spiritual privileges which according to the New Testament are conferred on every believer. These privileges are related to the one supreme privilege—the right through Christ to enter the Holy of Holies

and to have direct access to God Himself. From this all the other features of our distinctive witness spring, as, for example, the right of the believer to his own private judgment in things spiritual, and to share in the spiritual and temporal functioning of the church (according to his gifts). But where this vital personal relationship with God is lacking, as it so often is in these days of spiritual declension, the distinctive witness of the Free Churches can have no real meaning or significance. What, for example, does the right of the direct access of the soul to God—surely the most wonderful and thrilling and ennobling privilege ever conferred upon man—mean to those who are strangers to inward communion with God? What does the consequent right of private judgement mean to those who, having no personal knowledge of the things of God, have therefore not qualified for the exercise of this privilege?

The same applies to elements of our Free Church witness, which peculiarly characterise particular Free Church denominations. To those who have never exercised personal "saving" faith in Christ, the witness to Believers' Baptism can mean very little. To those who are not consciously "born again", the principle of "the Gathered Church" may seem an impertinence. Those who have never known "the witness of the Spirit" may well regard the doctrine of "Assurance" as a form of spiritual pride. Anybody who has tried to explain to people who have no living personal experience of God the significance of these vital elements of Free Church witness will appreciate how extremely difficult it is to do so effectually. There are many things you have to experience to know or even to understand. It is not surprising, therefore, that a great number of our own Free Church people, who have grown up during these last thirty or forty years of declension, have no real appreciation of the glory and significance of our distinctive witness or therefore of the justification of our continued separate existence. Some of these are now in positions of leadership and responsibility in the Free Churches. This in turn has led to a loss of confidence on the part of the Free Churches in their own distinctive mission to the world—a loss of confidence which does not seem to affect the other great branches of the Christian Church. Thus there has been a growing tendency in the Free Churches of late years to lay more stress on the visible Church and the ministry, on creeds, sacraments, liturgies, authority—on things, that is, which are external and corporate, rather than on things which are inward and personal and historically more characteristic of Catholicism (using the term broadly) than of Evangelicalism. This lack of confidence can only lead to further serious weakening of our position as Free Churches.

But enough of diagnosis. It is more important to attempt to indicate what are the remedies for the unsatisfactory condition in which the Free Churches as a whole find themselves. The Free Churches, which have so much in common should certainly come closer together in these days for fellowship, co-operation and consultation. There are those who urge the Free Churches to unite and form one Free Church of England. There is much to be said for this, but there are many difficulties. Indeed, the path to organic union is always difficult. The negotiations between the Congregational Union and the Presbyterian Church of England are the latest illustration of that fact. Actually, if only the Free Church leaders could see it, the Free Church Federal Council rightly, fully and enthusiastically implemented, provides here and now the means of achieving a real measure of organic union, common witness, full co-operation and fruitful fellowship. A whole-hearted turning to this organisation on the part of the Free Churches would work wonders. Thus coming together, the Free Churches should give serious attention to their distinctive testimony to see whether it is indeed a vital part of the teaching and practice of the New Testament, whether it has been rendered superfluous or irrelevant by the march of time or by changes in the other great Christian Communion. Within the limits allowed, it is impossible to deal with both these issues. We shall therefore assume that our witness is a vital part of New Testament teaching and practice and concentrate on the question as to whether it is really very relevant to the modern situation.

The great issue in the world of politics at present, overshadowing everything else, is the kind of democracy that is to prevail—free spiritual democracy such as we have known in this country and in America, or totalitarian democracy which denies individual freedom and rests upon a materialistic basis. Now it is no accident that the latter type of democracy first took root in Russia, where the prevalent form of Christianity (the Orthodox) was authoritarian and sacerdotal, and that free democracy has flourished in countries like Great Britain and America which have been saturated for centuries with the distinctive Free Church witness in doctrine and practice. We in England are apt to make the serious mistake of thinking that all countries should be able to adopt and run successfully free democratic institutions. We all too easily forget that a successful free democracy is a great achievement indeed, and makes tremendous demands upon the people who compose it. For this achievement a long and special preparation is needed. The people must have acquired a certain stability of character, a love of freedom, a sense of fair play, a capacity for responsibility, a political sagacity, a willingness to abide by majority decisions.

Some at least must have had experience elsewhere of the working of democratic institutions. The Free Churches have given, and are giving, thousands of people in this country and America precisely this long and special preparation, to a degree which is still without parallel. There is an intimate connection between free democracy and the Free Churches. Indeed, free democracy has been described as "the priesthood of all believers applied to politics." No other section of the Christian Church has given, or is giving, such full expression in practice as well as preaching to this great emancipating doctrine. In the Free Churches, laymen are given adequate scope for self-expression and development. They share in all the spiritual functions of the church and take their part in the government of the Church at all levels. They therefore receive a training which develops their spiritual gifts and enhances their personality—a training which accustoms them to the exercise of the privileges and responsibilities of democratic institutions, and which in fact, gives them an all-round and most effective preparation for citizenship and leadership in free democracies. The Right Honourable Jack Lawson, M.P., describes a visit to a little chapel in a Durham colliery village in the following terms :

"Sunday evening in mid-September. A sky of blue and gold. Small gardens in full flower, rich coloured and fragrant. People coming along the streets of the colliery village to the Chapel at the end. As we enter the organ rolls low. The organist is a workman. There is . . . a miner. He has three tall sons, members of the Chapel, two are local preachers. The choir-master is a local preacher, an unemployed miner. The steward is a preacher. Without stopping, I count eight young men, members with us, who are preachers. One of them was conducting service tonight. There is . . . forthright, likes to speak his mind; and carefully reads the lesson from his Bible. Men who do the necessary humble things of life, with their wives and daughters. These men are loyal to their Union; advanced in politics; proud of their own and their homes. Resting there, reflecting, mind quieted to meditation, prayer. The salt of the earth."

There is no parallel to this outside the Free Churches. It is not therefore spiritual arrogance or mere denominational pride to claim that the thousands of such "little Bethels," which stud our countryside, have made and are making, a unique and priceless contribution to the leavening, training and preparation of our people for the responsibilities and privileges of free democracy, and to say that, if the witness of the Free Churches in teaching and practice is seriously impaired, or ceases to be given, it is

doubtful whether free democracies can long continue to function successfully. Our witness, therefore, is supremely relevant today.

This conviction will be strengthened if we consider another great and related issue confronting us at the present time. Free democracy depends ultimately on the quality and development of the individual. But it is just here where the danger lies nowadays. The individual is being assailed by many factors in our modern life which rob him of personality and significance, and the chance of self-development. These are days of specialisation, mechanisation and socialisation. All three may be inevitable and in varying degrees right, but this does not remove the danger of their combining to rob the ordinary man of his individuality, and of a proper sense of his dignity, personal worth and significance, and of the opportunity to express and develop his own gifts and graces. Specialisation, for example, is increasing. The field of modern knowledge is being sub-divided and parcelled out, in ever-diminishing plots, to the experts. But the vast majority of men are not experts in anything. They are mere "laymen" in every realm—that is, men without any opinion on any subject which is regarded as worth expressing or acknowledged as authoritative. This depersonalising and belittling effect of specialisation is aided and abetted by the increasing mechanization we observe everywhere. Craft is being eliminated from industry. Men increasingly are serving machines in repetitive processes, and tending themselves to become mechanised as a result. Workers are increasingly bored by work in which they can take little interest or pride.

Then there is the modern State which threatens to carry this process of depersonalisation a stage further, indeed to its final Nemesis. The writer does not intend to disparage Socialism—far from it—but there is a grave danger of an omni-competent State taking charge of us, at every stage of life, from the cradle to the grave. If this ever really comes to pass, our demoralisation will be complete.

This, of course, is an exaggerated account, but the exaggeration is deliberate. We need to see the tendencies which increasingly threaten our personality, individuality, and significance and development—in short, our manhood. We are in danger of creating a race of morons, incapable of real thought, initiative or responsibility. If we are not careful, a few super-intelligent and super-trained people will eventually control the entire life of us all. Clearly then, the distinctive Free Church witness to the priesthood of all believers is more needed than ever as an antidote to these baneful modern tendencies. In our Free Churches the ordinary man should find escape from the world and its belittling influences and hear God's call, not to

submit his soul to external religious authority but, in a fellowship of brethren, to stand on his feet, to quit him like a man, to work out his salvation with fear and trembling, to become indeed a king and priest, and even a son of God. He should discover opportunity of expressing and developing his personality by being invited to share appropriately his gifts both spiritual and temporal. In short, he should find the antidote to the de-personalising belittling and soul-destroying influences of modern life.

The Free Church witness is obviously a matter of primary importance for the world today and a vital part of the Gospel of Christ. We should therefore consider together how we can best instruct our people, particularly our young people, in this witness. The young people of the Free Churches are sadly lacking here. A Methodist minister told the writer some time ago that his daughter had informed him that she was thinking of becoming a Roman Catholic. When he enquired why, he discovered that the girl with whom she worked was a devout Roman Catholic, and instead of the Methodist influencing the Roman Catholic, the Roman Catholic had influenced the Methodist. The simple reason for this was that the Roman Catholic girl had been well instructed in the tenets of her faith. She knew what she believed and loved what she knew; whereas the Methodist girl was ill-informed and nebulous about the distinctive doctrines and principles of Methodism. We have indeed been shamefully remiss in this matter. Our intelligent young people are probably less informed about their own distinctive witness than their counterparts in the Church of England or the Roman Catholic Church. This situation we must remedy.

Finally, we should consider how the work of God in our churches can be revived. Only thus can our witness become real, living and potent. In revival the Free Churches were born; in revival alone can they be re-born. As they were the first to wilt when the tides of the Spirit began to ebb, so they will be the first to revive when the tides of the Spirit begin to flow in again. A revival on the scale of Pentecost, the Reformation, or the Great Evangelical Awakening of the eighteenth century (which is our real need) is not ours to command. Such times and seasons the Father hath put under His own authority. But there is a real sense in which we can command here and now the Spirit's mighty power. There can be local revivals wherever certain conditions are fulfilled, and these conditions are laid down for us in the New Testament. If we fall in line with Apostolic precept and practice, we can have revival here and now in our churches.

Summing up briefly, we may say that while the position of the Free Churches today is such as to cause serious concern

to all with deep Free Church convictions, there is no need to be pessimistic, still less to despair. The things for which we peculiarly stand are a vital and integral part of the Gospel and more relevant to the world's need than ever. Moreover, a great spiritual re-awakening is coming soon. When it comes there will be a fresh discovery of the glory and power of the Gospel. In that day it will not be the catholic but the evangelical expression of Christianity which will be most mightily revived. The future is with that presentation of the Christian religion which to a unique degree has characterised the Free Churches in their best days. If therefore the Free Churches will come together more in fellowship and service, and really bestir and prepare themselves, they will find it easier than any other section of the Church because of their distinctive witness in teaching and practice, to receive the outpouring of the Spirit, without let or hindrance, and to mediate its power and its blessing to mankind.

HENRY T. WIGLEY.

One's Man's Testimony by Norman Goodall. (Independent Press. 6s.)

The Rev. Norman Goodall, Secretary of the International Missionary Council, tells us in his foreword to this book that it is the answer to a question often put to him by his friends: "How can we keep our hold on the Faith while so many things seem to be going from bad to worse?" In reflecting on this question it seemed to Mr. Goodall that with him it was a case of the Faith keeping hold on him through two world wars and their aftermath. He has given us a delightful and refreshing book, an affirmation of faith and at the same time in part a spiritual autobiography that is modest, extremely honest, and the product of a mind at grips with the contemporary world. It is a book of encouragement and illumination, and is marked by literary grace. It is much to be hoped that Mr. Goodall will manage to find time in his very busy life to give us more from his pen.

JOHN O. BARRETT.